

A Case Study in Curriculum Decision Making and Federal Education Policy

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The decision by a Reagan administration appointee to terminate funding of 13 validated projects illustrates the influence of politics on policy.

In a democracy, policy is usually made by elected officials or representative groups. Sometimes, however, a single appointed administrator has great influence on what government actually does. Actions taken by an Assistant Secretary of the U.S. Department of Education in 1982 are a case in point.

The National Diffusion Network (NDN) was created in 1974 within the U.S. Office of Education to support the dissemination of exemplary curriculum programs to local educational agencies. To be accepted into the National Diffusion Network, curriculum programs must receive a "pass" from the Joint Dissemination Review Panel (JDRP), which decides from evidence submitted whether a program is effective in the schools in which it was developed and whether it can be effective in other schools as well. After receiving validation from the JDRP, a program must then compete with other validated programs for limited NDN

dissemination funding. In 1981, 139 curriculum programs were receiving funds to help school districts learn about their programs and to assist in the process of implementation.

In the spring of 1982, the NDN booklet of JDRP-approved programs, *Educational Programs That Work*, listed 87 programs that had been placed in a continuing funding category until 1985, contingent upon their maintaining satisfactory performance in meeting the stated goals of the NDN. Thus, the directors of the 87 continuing programs submitted their renewal applications in December 1981. Funding decisions were to be based on three stages of review. First, a group of consultants were to examine each application and respond to the question, "Is continuation of the grant in the best interest of the government?"

After each program was examined, a decision on each was communicated to Lee Wickline, Director of the National Diffusion Network, who recommended 83 of the 87 programs that had applied for continued funding to Donald J. Senese, whose duties included administration and supervision of the National Diffusion Network, the National Institute of Education, the

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Office of Libraries and Technologies, and the National Center for Education Statistics. Senese's review was to be the final stage in the review process.

This summary of events is a necessary backdrop to the decision Senese made to terminate support of 13 of the projects recommended for funding by Wickline. The directors of each of the 13 terminated projects received notice through a letter in which Senese stated:

After giving careful consideration to your application, I have made a determination that the continuation of this project is not in the best interest of the federal government.¹

Not surprisingly, the letters received by the directors and staffs of the 13 terminated projects resulted in a flurry of activity as explanations were sought from Senese's office. Apparently, the explanations did not sufficiently satisfy all the project directors. Four brought suit against Terrell Bell, Secretary of the Department of Education for the United States. The four project directors charged that in terminating their funding Senese violated their First Amendment rights by making personal political, social, and religious judgments. The central evidence in the case was a deposition by Donald J. Senese taken on May 26, 1982, in the U.S. District Court for New Jersey. Soon after the deposition was taken, Judge Dickinson Debevoise dismissed the suit, ruling that Senese's action was "unreviewable" in legal terms.²

The Deposition as a Sociopolitical Statement on Curriculum

Although the lawsuit was quickly brushed aside, the information that emerged from the deposition is a treasure trove of insight into the philosophic orientation and value preferences regarding curriculum of an educator working in the role of political decision maker. Prior to analyzing the rationale advanced by Senese to explain his action in respect to each project, a description of three of the projects discussed during the suit is in order:

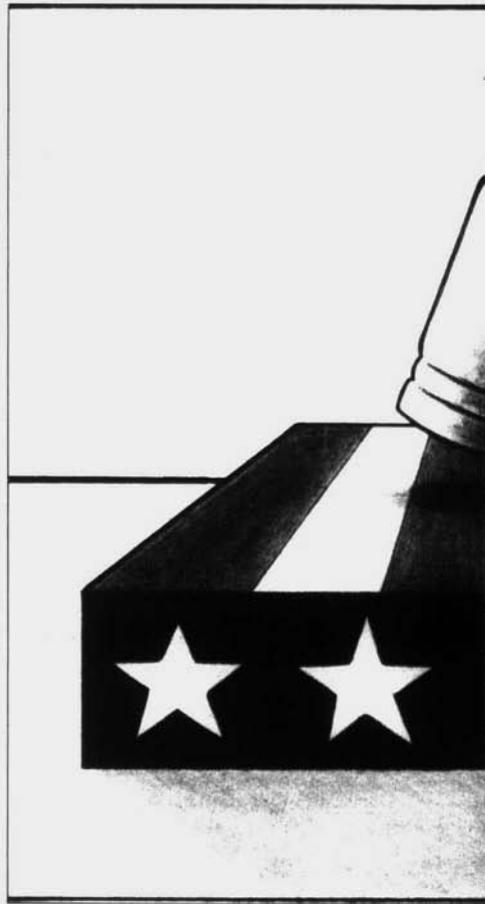
1. *Project Environment.* An interdisciplinary curriculum in environmental education designed to prepare students to examine local environmental problems and understand why citizens must develop an environmental ethic based on sound technological choices. . . . A common problem-solving model is used as a guide for examining local problems, weighted between social and purely scientific concerns.

2. *World Religions.* A semester-length elective social studies course about religion for high school students. It consists of six instructional units that may be implemented wholly or in part including a unit on religious expression and five separate units on the Hindu, Buddhist, Judaic, Christian, and Islamic traditions. It is intended to help students acquire greater awareness, understanding, and appreciation of religious diversity and the legitimacy of the various expressions and beliefs.

3. *Project Career Choice.* Aims to expose students to the concepts of growth and change and to make them aware of their needs, skills, strengths, aptitudes, feelings, and motivations. The program relates occupational information to the student's self-concept. Emphasis is placed on choosing and examining alternatives in order to make decisions.³

Senese maintained that the reasons for termination of funding in each case involved performance factors as well as judgments about program worth. However, the persuasiveness of this assertion is reduced because the three projects, as well as the other ten that were terminated by Senese, had been approved by the panel of reviewers and by Wickline. The deposition also revealed that Senese had serious reservations about the "intrinsic worth or merit" of the 13 projects—serious enough to place their continuing funding in jeopardy. Unfortunately, responses by Senese to a sequence of questions from the plaintiffs' attorney do not support a conclusion that he immersed himself in the substance of each project to the extent that would be required to establish his "bona fides" as an "expert judge."

Q. So, that insofar as you had information on these 13 projects, you had it from the booklet, from consultations with Dr. Wickline and his staff, or from data Dr. Wickline and his staff supplied. I assume also the data that the applicant would supply in the form of an application would also be included.



Senese. Yes, that would be correct.

Q. And that's all?

Senese. Yes, as far as the basic source information, yes.

Q. How about less than the basic information? Is there any other source information which you would describe as other than basic?

Senese. No, that would be the information that would be available and was available to me when I made my decision.⁴

Thus, we are left with the impression that Senese gave only cursory attention to the materials and activities contained in the projects. He apparently utilized a set of sociopolitical principles to develop a list of likely candidates for termination.



What were these general principles? How were they applied as Senese considered each case? For most of the 13 terminated projects, there is no record to examine. However, in respect to the projects that were discussed extensively in the suit against the Department of Education; the deposition contained Senese's explanations as he responded to questions from the plaintiffs' attorney. The questioning turned to the factors that Senese used in defunding *Project Environment*. In referring to the fact that Senese judged the program to be "nonacademic," the attorney asked, "Why?"

Senese. Because I don't think that it teaches the basic literacy skills in areas

such as math, science, foreign language, reading, or writing that would be essential to the student to function in society. And also I do not believe it is in the best interest of the United States government to continue.

Q. Why is it not within the best interest of the national government?

Senese. Because I think the content ... is to teach an environmental ethic, which is not teaching about the environment itself. I believe that those subject matters could be covered in ... areas such as science.

Q. Do you know ... that course did not endow students with ... knowledge regarding the environment?

Senese. There may have been some scientific information that was imparted. It was not the major part of the course or the major objective of the course.

Q. Again, your understanding of this course is derived entirely from the NDN booklet; is that correct?

Senese. And ... discussions I ... had with Dr. Wickline.

Q. Did you have any discussions with Dr. Wickline?

Senese. ... I think I asked him specifically, "Does it teach about environment or was it an environmental ethic?" which is something different.

Q. What is an environmental ethic?

Senese. That is a good question. I wondered about that myself.

Q. Did you ask Dr. Wickline what he understood environmental ethic to be?

Senese. Well, He referred me to the description. And according to this it's to prepare students to examine local environmental problems and understand why citizens must develop an environmental ethic based on sound technological choice.

In the case of *Project Environment*, then, Senese was critical of the program's lack of emphasis on the environment as a scientific study and its devotion to the study of environmental problems as well as to the creation of a set of values and principles to guide proper conduct toward the environment.

The questioner next directed attention to *World Religions*.

Q. Your view is that it is inappropriate for the federal government to fund comparative religion courses?

Senese. ... I think any time the federal government funds a program that contains a judgmental value on religion, it is improper for the federal government to be involved.

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Q. Did you ever take a comparative religion course, or are you familiar with such courses?

Senese. I am familiar with the courses, yes.

Q. You are saying, if I understand you correctly, that these courses treat each religion as though it is equally worthwhile and that is the reason why the federal government shouldn't fund it?

Senese. ... It is my opinion that most of the people who would subscribe to a particular religion would believe that their religion would be the true or only religion, and that by teaching the diversity of religion and also teaching the legitimacy of various expressions and beliefs, that would be an interference with that individual belief.⁶

In terminating *World Religions*, Senese argued that it is not proper for the federal government to be involved in teaching about the world's major religions. He expressed concern about the implied support for "moral relativism," in that teaching about religions other than a child's own religion extends to them an aura of legitimacy and equal worth. He concluded that teaching about other religions interferes with individual belief and, thus, is not in the best interest of the federal government.

The last of the terminated projects to be discussed during the deposition was *Project Career Choice*. In this sequence of questions and answers the key issue again revolved around the nature and importance of academics and basic literacy and their place in the schools.

Q. ... Again, ... you indicated that the program was nonacademic, if I recall correctly.

Senese. That's correct.

Q. Where did you derive your understanding that the program was nonacademic in nature?

Senese. I think from the outline of the program itself ... the whole description gives us that information. ... The emphasis is placed on choosing and examining ... alternatives in order to make decisions. At the elementary school level the primary goal of the program is to change students' attitude toward the world of work and to break down occupational stereotypes. The program aims to increase student knowledge of the world of work. ... I do not say that those are academic goals. They don't increase basic literacy in such areas as reading, writing, science, math, or foreign language or assist someone to function in the world. ... It deals with attitudes ... this is not a skill acquiring course.

Q. You know that there were no skills taught in this course?

Senese. I think you have to look at the whole context. And this is what I explained earlier, where you may have reading and writing and that as a component of a particular project without any judgment on how effective that reading and writing training was ... self-awareness, career awareness, and decision making are the threads that weave the project components together.

The crux of the disagreement over academics and nonacademics as illustrated in the sequence of questions is the proportion of time and attention the program appears to allot to literacy activity defined as study of reading, writing, science, math, or foreign language. To Senese, programs that emphasize such processes as "examining alternatives, changing attitudes, and breaking down stereotypes" do not qualify as academic content. Furthermore, Senese seemed to use the additional criterion that any literacy activity imbedded in a given program must be evaluated for its effectiveness if such activity is to count as academics.

Educational Policies in the Political Process

The information in the deposition revealed the force of the conservative education agenda on Senese's curriculum decision making as it directed him to identify suitable projects for termination. Clearly, he preferred cognitive over affective content. Also clear is his preference for basic skill instruction in reading, science, foreign language, and writing in contrast to courses and units forged out of the life adjustment or reconstructionist approaches to curriculum. In fact, his disdain for the favored terminology of the progressive movement in education (decision making, self-concept, enhancement, attitude change, improving self-worth, appreciation of religious diversity, examining career alternatives, and so forth) can be found in each of his decisions. There also is a possibility that Senese terminated the projects because he wished to remove any imprimatur of legitimacy from the programs he found to be philosophically objectionable. By removing them from the marketplace of NDN program alternatives, he also eliminated

any chance that a school district would have the opportunity to adopt one of the programs.

Too often, textbooks in graduate curriculum courses refer to the politics of curriculum in far too general terms. One purpose of this article is to provide evidence about a specific set of actions that clearly demonstrates the shifting of educational policy making with the shifting of the political process. A second purpose is to encourage the search for and use of original source data such as in the Senese deposition in the reporting of educational policy making.

Still another purpose is to suggest that preventing educational ideas from entering and continuing in the marketplace is viewed by some as a legitimate exercise of political action. If this is true, then educators must become more aware of how political decisions are made. □

¹Senese, Donald J., "Letter to Designated Officials at Terminated Projects," United States Department of Education, Washington, D.C., April 7, 1982.

²"Briefly Stated," *Education USA*, July 5, 1982.

³*Educational Programs That Work*, 8th ed., National Diffusion Network, Department of Education, 1981. (Note that the descriptions of the projects discussed in the article are about as they appear in the above-named booklet. However, the titles of the projects have been changed to provide a shield of privacy for the projects and their staffs.)

⁴Deposition of Donald J. Senese in the case *Holistic Learning Resources et al. Plaintiffs vs. Terrell Bell, Secretary of the Department of Education for the United States, et al., Defendants in the United States District Court for the District of New Jersey*, C.A. No. 82-1516, taken on May 26, 1982.

⁵Ibid.

⁶Ibid.

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