

STATEMENT OF
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REGARDING A FEDERAL DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
BEFORE THE U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
SUBCOMMITTEE ON LEGISLATION AND NATIONAL SECURITY
March 27, 1979.

I am Albert Shanker, President of the American Federation of Teachers, AFL-CIO, an organization of over one-half million teachers and other educational personnel. Our members have great concern for the quality of education and for the administration of federal education programs. We are also greatly affected by changes in educational policy on the national level. For this reason, we welcome the opportunity to present our views to the Committee on the subject of legislation creating a federal Department of Education.

Many individuals and groups have lent their names and support to the proposition that a federal education department be created, and I admit that the proposal has a surface appeal as so many simple solutions to complex problems do. Perhaps it is precisely the simplicity of this idea when compared to the difficulties that afflict education on any level that allows many groups without other ideas for improving education to endorse this proposal.

I believe that the proposed Education Department is built on a mythology about what will improve education and I would like to examine some of these myths with the Committee. I know we all agree that education needs better leadership and greater prestige. Proponents have said that creating a federal department will magically increase education's prestige. I truly wish that public support could be encouraged by shifts in bureaucratic structuring. The experience over the past few years shows that such support depends on other things. Prestige is earned by educational results and results are produced by efforts to improve the quality of instruction at the state and local level where education achievement takes place.

In the 1950's and 1960's there was a need for specific help to states and localities in the form of federal initiatives like NDEA and ESEA, aimed at improving the educational opportunities available to children. But, this bill means nothing to children and teachers involved in the education process; it is purely a Washington game. In fact, the Department's failure to create specific improvements might very well result in declining support from a public that has been led to expect it to improve educational achievement.

The major goal of a Department was the centralizing of all educational programs under one administration. That battle was lost in the last Congress when virtually all programs that are not a part of HEW's existing education division were taken out of the bill. The myth of consolidation lies in ruins. It is clear that a new department will only be one more agency for educators to deal with.

Support for a federal department is further predicated on the mistaken assumption that everyone concerned is solidly behind the department idea; this is far from true. A series of recent polls show that only 19% of the American public perceive education as a national problem and only 15% think education problems should be solved primarily by the Federal government. Only 11% blame "poor government policies toward education" for whatever problems the schools are having.

A Gallup poll released in September 1977 found that a strong plurality of 45% of public school parents oppose taking education out of HEW to create a separate education department. The rest either favor the proposition or have no opinion. In no sex, race, or age sub-group examined by the pollsters did a majority support the idea. In fact, in only one subgroup

did a majority have an opinion at all. Among non-whites, 51% oppose the creation of a separate Department of Education. We believe this finding is based upon the feeling of most Americans, that another federal agency especially in an area as sensitive as education might very well have profound consequences for the existing structure of education governance.

Many seem to believe that the creation of a federal department of education will magically result in an increase in federal education funds though they stop short of explaining exactly how this will come about. It is our belief that increases in federal funds for education will result from the leadership of a pro-education President and Congress, in conjunction with a program to promote educational effectiveness.

This has happened already, to some degree. Since taking office the Carter Administration has increased aid to education by almost 50%. If increases in funding are dependent on a Department of Education, how did this increase in education dollars come about? The answer is simple. The President advocated more funds for education and he did not need a department to tell him to hold that view.

We believe that increase in education funds depends on the public support behind various programs, not on alterations in anybody's flow chart. If education has the confidence of the American people, it will get the federal dollars it needs. If it doesn't, it won't. Nor will having a federal department change the currently dominant role of economic circumstances in setting the budget, as was all too clear in the budget recently submitted by President Carter. As always, final money decisions will be made by the Congress as intended by the Constitution.

We are also deeply concerned that a preoccupation with the issue

will prevent us from perceiving what is really important. Proponents of a Federal Department of Education have been regrettably myopic with regard to the relationship between education and other social services. It is precisely because these connections do exist that it makes sense to relate policy initiatives in welfare and health to those in education. One of the problems with education policy-making thus far is that it has been too narrowly conceived. A federal department would only exacerbate this tendency. It is clear that any welfare reform proposal must include a child care and job training component if welfare dependency is to be replaced with a reliance on work. Proposals for a Federal Department of Education do not address the fact that more cooperation between the schools and other public services would better serve the public.

So far, I have only pointed out misconceptions and misunderstandings about this idea. I also think there are some potential dangers. Our public school system is built upon a system of local control by local school boards. That this system could effectively use more federal financial assistance is beyond dispute. But, how does the creation of a Federal Department of Education address this thorny and difficult issue? Namely, what is the federal role in education? There are no other cabinet-level departments in areas which are constitutionally left to the states and localities.

There are other questions that should be resolved before this step is taken. For example, will a federal department encourage us to narrow our perspectives on what the schools should do? I have already suggested a relationship between federal education and welfare policies. There are a number of additional reasons why health, welfare and education administration

belong together at the federal level:

1. Approaches to developing support for child care in all its health and welfare dimensions must take into account the role of the schools. How should early childhood development programs service the needs of welfare mothers? What kind of screening and diagnostic services could the schools offer to young children? It is clear that programs such as Head Start will not be transferred. Other programs will probably be omitted as well. Does this make organizational sense?
2. As declining enrollments leave us with surplus resources and personnel the schools could be used for education-related services such as counseling for adolescent pregnant girls, adult education, recreation, vocational counseling, and other community services. A bill that embodies this concept, the Community Education Act, which authorizes hundreds of millions of dollars was approved by the Congress last year. Certainly, if programs such as this one are to get off the ground, HEW coordination will be crucial.

These examples show that it makes sense to launch a coordinated health, welfare and education approach to the major problems our nation faces; poverty, equal educational opportunity, welfare and youth unemployment. A narrow federal department does not facilitate such a development.

I am sure this Committee is curious as to how the Administration's latest proposals were arrived at. Certainly some of the discussion has focused on whether a new department should be broadly conceived or narrowly confined to the education sector. The Administration attempted a small amount of consolidation in its original proposal. In H.R. 2444 we have the classic case of a bill that has lost its purpose. It made some sense to consolidate, even though the Administration omitted major programs such as veterans educational benefits, vocational rehabilitation and others. Support for even the modest Administration approach

was short-lived. We pointed out last year that even the minor consolidation by the Administration would be strenuously resisted; we did not know how right we were. Department proponents are so interested in a trophy to hang on the wall that they will take any bill and any Department regardless of its form. The spectacle of one program after another escaping from the jurisdiction of the new Department leaves only those with a proprietary interest still in a position to justify this fiasco.

The AFT represents more college professor members than any other organization in this country. We are deeply concerned with their point of view and they tend to be even more skeptical of this proposal than other AFT members. Forty-five percent of higher education funds come from the federal level while only 9% of elementary and secondary education funds are federal. Research funds for institutions of higher education come from practically every department in the federal government. Their administration probably never could or should be consolidated. We do not believe that post-secondary education would benefit from a federal department that encompasses an education division, of HEW and little else.

The AFT is also concerned, although not as much as you should be, with the misconception that creation of a federal department is what shows the world you have power. Adding a new Department to the cabinet will increase the pressure coming from other groups to follow suit by demanding their own separate departments. It will simply set off a trend that equates the importance of policy initiatives in a wide range of areas with the existence of a Federal Department. As misguided as this trend might be, once education had successfully completed such an equation, it is almost inevitable that other would take up the cudgels. In fact, such a bill

has already been introduced for health, justified I might add, with the exact rhetoric and arguments used for education.

These are our doubts about and objections to the federal department of education idea. Nevertheless, we do support steps that could be taken to improve the federal administration of education programs:

1. It is obvious to nearly everyone that it makes no sense to have two authorities overseeing the Education Division in HEW. While the Assistant Secretary theoretically has more status and policy control, program authority rests with the Commissioner. These authorities should be consolidated into one. It might also be desirable to raise the status of the education authority to that of Undersecretary. This clarification of roles and responsibilities could help to end the confusion and competition that now characterizes the Education Division.
2. Research authorities within the Education Division could be consolidated under the National Institute of Education. It makes more sense to separate research from program administration if objectivity is of any importance. The National Center for Education Statistics should also be under the NIE umbrella.
3. Other consolidations that would help to streamline the education division including putting together training programs under one authority; consolidation of all legislative functions related to education into one office; upgrading and centralizing legal counsel for education; and creating a single budget office.
4. More positions that involve presidential appointment could be created so that the education division can attract quality personnel at the highest levels.
5. Some programs now administered by other divisions of HEW should be administered by the Education Division. The most obvious of these are Head Start and Early Periodic Screening and Diagnosis, both of which sponsor many school-based programs.
6. The Federal Interagency Committee on Education could be strengthened even further and its status upgraded. The Secretary of HEW should sit on this committee and it should have the statutory authority to coordinate HEW and Labor Department Administration of CETA, for example.

Our reservations about the federal department of education are based on the premise that organization, or reorganization, provides the means to an end. None of the arguments used to justify a federal department of education give any clear indication of what ends its proponents have in mind. Status and prestige are weak needs to build a federal education department on. I would go so far as to say that the great enthusiasm for a federal department of education obscures some very real doubts about where the federal government should be going. One of the inherent difficulties of reaching agreements about the federal role in education is the great difference in the perspective of federal, state and local interests in educational policy. The degree and substance of these differences is far greater for education than for other sectors in which the federal government plays a significant role.

Agreement on the legitimate federal role is something we must all work toward. A federal education department is a non-answer to some very real problems. It seems to us that this proposal represents these problems, not their solution. The words of a first century citizen of Rome comes to mind, Mr. Gaius Petronius advises:

"We trained hard, but it seemed that every time we were beginning to form up into teams, we would be reorganized. I was to learn later in life that we tend to meet any new situation by reorganizing, and a wonderful method it can be for creating the illusion of progress while producing confusion, inefficiency and demoralization."

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