

## COMMENTARY

# Federal Assistance To Education Has Had Good Effect

By Ernest L. Boyer

**T**he new year, along with the new, drastic cut-backs being proposed in federal education programs, raises the question of whether in the Administration's haste to rid our schools of Washington, we risk not only undoing something of enormous value to schools but to our society as a whole.

I do not disagree that the federal government has long needed pruning and taming. Regulations, paperwork, bureaucratic rigidity, governmental gobbledygook: All of us have been their victims, and the entire nation—in spirit, and in cold cash—has borne the cost.

But it is wrong to suggest that every federal program is worthless. It is simplistic to argue that every regulation is malicious. It is naïve to claim that the states and localities can take over Washington's role.

Education in this country has always been a state and local function. And despite recent political rhetoric sug-



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initiative coaxed physicians into rural areas. With lagging productivity and competitiveness a national problem, encouraging foreign-language study is part of the national answer.

None of these purposes was imposed on the nation by conspiring, power-grabbing bureaucrats. They were responses to national emergencies, to decisions of the courts, or to a new commitment to social justice. They were proposed by Presidents and legislators, debated in Congress, weighed by citizens, constitutionally enacted and funded, and judicially enforced.

aren't enrolled in the program.

- Over the last two years, the nation's schools identified and served a quarter of a million handicapped students whose needs might otherwise have gone tragically unrecognized or unmet.

- The odds that young people from low-income backgrounds will finish high school are doubled if they are in Upward Bound.

- Because of student-assistance programs over the last decade, the number of minority-group members enrolled in colleges and vocational schools has increased by 250 percent, and their proportion in higher education has

gesting that Washington has usurped that power, the simple fact is that the federal contribution to all levels of education is still less than 10 percent of the total national expenditure.

Name the programs that this percentage comprises, and you'll be holding a ragged laundry list. Money for "Sesame Street," college libraries, handicapped children, illiterate adults, desegregating school systems, metric education—even a list this brief is ragged, and when you name all 130 or so federal education programs, the sense of unevenness is overwhelming.

But there is another way to think of Washington's education programs, and that is to ask what the federal *mission* in education is. Sort the 130 programs according to their purposes, and a much cleaner picture emerges.

Three broad missions stand out. First, *to promote equality*. In 1965, the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (Title I) authorized funds to help disadvantaged children learn the basic skills. In 1972, college grants and loans were made available to students from low-income families. We also have federal programs for American Indian children, children of immigrant workers who are moved from school to school, and for those from non-English speaking families. Delivering that education is a local and state task, but ensuring that these children have equal chances to succeed is a national responsibility.

Second, *to advance quality*. Whether helping teachers to retrain, or gifted children to reach their potential, or Fulbright scholars to study abroad, the federal government affirms that excellence in education is as nationally important as access to it. Washington's purpose is not to set the standards; it is to say that standards matter.

Third, *to respond to national emergencies*. From time to time—especially in crisis—the American people decide that there is a direction in which we want our country to move, and we ask education to help us get there. It took federal leadership—programs and dollars—to boost our commitment to science in the wake of Sputnik. A federal

## The reason programs were funded by Washington was that the states and localities were not able to deliver—and sometimes refused to deliver—the services to schools and students that the nation needed.

I'm not arguing that every program should have been created. Some were trivial, some were born in an educational pork barrel, and there's no way to win public confidence in government without acknowledging—and undoing—the errors.

Nor am I suggesting that every program is a model of effectiveness. Too many student loan defaulters go unpursued. Too much vocational-education money gets spent on training for jobs that won't exist. Too few education-research projects benefit anyone but other researchers.

But there's a difference between saying that some programs should be rethought and that the federal mission should be wiped out. The reason the programs were funded by Washington, and the whole point of attaching strings to the funds, was that the states and localities were not able to deliver—and sometimes refused to deliver—the services to schools and students that the nation needed. If local school districts had been funding Upward Bound and basic-skills programs for disadvantaged children in the first place, or if they had been serving handicapped or immigrant children, there would have been no need for Washington to get involved.

**W**hat makes all this celebrating of the demise of Washington's role so sad is that we are just beginning to see clear results from the federal effort:

- Basic-skills test scores are rising in Los Angeles, New York, Boston, Philadelphia, and around the nation.
- Children in Title I are doing better—sometimes 10 and 20 percent better—in reading and math than children who

doubled.

Here's the point. The federal partnership in education has made a difference. Schools have been enriched. Children have been helped. And yet, instead of defending programs such as these, we claim victory when they are made weaker.

I hope that governors and mayors will be able to find the revenue they'll need to make

up for the shortfall—because private philanthropy will come nowhere near to taking up the slack. I hope that parents and citizens will be able to pressure local school officials to meet the needs of traditionally bypassed students—because Washington no longer has a strong say in how the funds are spent.

If we want to repeal or refocus the federal role in education, let us have that debate explicitly and on its merits. But to say the federal government has no role in education distorts the past and—for millions of young Americans—dims the future, too.

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