

Federal Aid to Education Since World War II: Purposes and Politics

By Carl F. Kaestle

Preface

Hundreds of essays have been written about it, thousands of hours of Congressional testimony devoted to it, dozens of campaigns focused on it; yet the origins of federal aid to elementary and secondary education are murky, its present status controversial, and its future uncertain. In an attempt to sort out the complicated history of the issue, this essay focuses on the purposes that have been asserted for federal aid in education, and the politics that have surrounded those purposes. The federal role in elementary and secondary education of course extends far beyond legislation that provides financial *aid* to schools. Federal courts and agencies regulate education in many ways; and the President, the Secretary of Education and others use their “bully pulpit” to convene discussions, to frame issues, and to set agendas. Many agencies outside of the Department of Education carry on educational programs, not only providing money but disseminating innovations and evaluating programs. This paper, however, focuses on the major bills for federal aid to schools, a prominent topic of debate and a matter of great concern to states and to localities. It is not a chronological narrative but rather an examination of purposes and politics.

CONTEXT:

AMERICA AFTER WORLD WAR II

Most people seem to agree on at least one thing about federal aid to education: there wasn't much of it before World War II. In the first 150 years of the country's history, the Congress occasionally announced that education was in the national interest and from time to time devoted some resources to improve education, notably through land grants to colleges, vocational education programs run through the states, and various bills to support the education of native Americans.

Nonetheless, the federal role in education was neither very controversial nor very consequential for most Americans and their politicians. To be sure, there were advocates of more substantial general aid to elementary and secondary education, but they were regularly trounced in Congress.¹

Indeed, the drubbing continued in the 1940's and 50's — but by then the context was different. The Depression and the War had changed the face of federalism in America. In response to the economic crisis President Franklin Roosevelt had engaged the federal government in welfare and the

economy on a scale hitherto unknown. Federal construction projects, welfare programs, and social security raised people's expectations about what the federal government could do for people. These expectations were reinforced by Roosevelt's enunciation of the Four Freedoms in 1941, including the freedom from "want" and "fear." He embellished these in his last annual message in 1944, setting out an "economic bill of rights" that included health, education, shelter, and employment. As David Kennedy points out, Americans in 1944, with the distractions of war and the security of a booming wartime economy, were much less attentive to this message than they had been earlier.²

Still, Roosevelt's rhetorical expansion of Americans' rights reflected a growing reality of governmental activism. Federal grants in aid programs, ranging from agriculture to welfare, rose from three percent of the states' total revenues in 1932 to ten percent in 1952.³ Liberal attitudes toward welfare and social security survived assaults on the New Deal and made gradual progress in both Democratic and Republican administrations in the 1950's.⁴ President Harry Truman embraced the expansion of rights and expectations and put more emphasis on civil rights, which met with modest success.⁵ Although the venerable tradition of local and state control entered the post-War world in robust health, the New Deal had challenged state governments by showing what government could do.⁶ Meanwhile, the Supreme Court of the 1930's began to press the role of the federal judiciary in civil rights. Led by Hugo Black, the Court increasingly applied the Fourteenth Amendment and the Bill of Rights to the states.⁷

America's entry into World War II entailed a massive mobilization of technology, organizations, and human beings. The federal government created a defense infrastructure — planning, organizing, recruiting, training, producing, trans-

porting, storing, and deploying the goods and personnel of war. The federal government thereby entered into the lives of its citizens at home and abroad with unprecedented scale and authority.⁸ The momentum of the War mobilization carried into the years beyond. In the immediate aftermath, there was the huge job of relocating men and women from the armed forces back into the civilian economy. One of the results of manpower planning discussions occasioned by this looming transition was the Servicemen's Readjustment Act, passed in 1944. This "GI Bill of Rights" was intended in part to reward service to the country and in part to ameliorate the negative effects unemployment might have on the economy. The bill provided unemployment compensation, grants for education and training, and loans for home purchases.⁹

While the GI Bill addressed the sacrifices made by individuals, a second piece of legislation recognized the costs of the War to communities. As the War deepened, the federal government had built more and more defense plants and supply depots in the United States. These federal properties were exempt from local taxation. Thus, many communities were faced with housing shortages and with children in their public schools for whom they had no matching tax revenues. Congress addressed the housing problem in the Lanham Act of 1940, providing construction money. When that bill was reauthorized in 1941, the lawmakers tackled the education problem, providing funds for both the construction and operation of schools in federally affected areas. The legislation sternly promised that the federal government would exercise no "supervision or control" over schools thus assisted.¹⁰ Although these programs were seen as temporary, the federal impact on localities did not cease with the War. New "impact" legislation was passed in 1950, PL 815 for construction and PL 874 for operating expenditures.¹¹ Like the GI Bill,

impact legislation proved uncontroversial and popular. Both of these forms of federal aid survived well beyond the 1940's.

The War also created momentum for liberal changes in employment conditions and civil rights. It raised expectations among unionized workers, who had achieved some bargaining gains during the War, among black Americans, who had fought for and won some modest civil rights gains in the military, and among women, many of whom were reluctant to give up the jobs they had assumed during the War. Thus, there were forces for change in post-War America, and there were new expectations about what the federal government could do.

Yet there were equally potent forces for a return to "normal." Many wanted a respite from change after the successive crises of depression and war. They did not want more government innovation and intervention. They wanted, in the words of Senator Robert Taft, to return to the "traditional American heart of things — liberty."¹² Many years earlier Alexis de Toqueville had worried that the pursuit of equality in America would centralize the government's power at the expense of liberty. Politics in America after World War II were still tempered by this polarity. Many preferred liberty to more government because the economy had recovered nicely, and for many, standards of living were up. Big manufacturing firms responded to some of labor's raised expectations, offering more benefits and job security in return for a truce between labor and management.¹³ And many people focused their attention not on the government but on the innovations coming out of appliance factories, the entertainment industries, and auto showrooms. Speaking of anti-New Deal sentiment, Eric Goldman wrote in 1955, "no nation can go through such rapid changes in its domestic life without backing up an enormous amount of puzzlement, resentment, and outright opposition. ...No group is more annoyed by

reform than those who have benefited from it and no longer need it."¹⁴ Thus, when proponents of federal aid to elementary and secondary schools like Democratic Senators Elbert Thomas of Utah and Lister Hill of Alabama revived their pre-War efforts, there was no shortage of opponents.

Opposition to Federal Aid

Until the late 1930's opponents had clung to a constitutional argument about the Tenth Amendment, stating that the Constitution reserved to the states all powers not specifically granted to the federal government in the Constitution, and that therefore the federal government had no constitutionally defensible role in the provision of education. From 1937 onward, the Supreme Court endorsed the federal government's authority more expansively, essentially rejecting the strict "enumerated powers" argument.¹⁵ Still, opponents of federal intervention in local public schools argued that it violated a valuable tradition. It was valuable because local control worked better. It worked better because local officials knew local problems and local people and could forge local solutions that worked. Why, then, did not the local school boards and their Chambers of Commerce oppose *state* authority in education, which, during the course of the twentieth century, had increased greatly? One would think that state government posed the same threat of strangers interfering with local schools; faceless bureaucrats in the state capital making cookie-cutter solutions, the same for all communities. Indeed, localities *had* opposed the states' role in elementary and secondary education in the first half of the nineteenth century, on just these grounds.¹⁶ But public opinion gradually swung toward state involvement. At first it was limited to required reports, a modicum of state aid, some rudimentary regulations upheld by county agents of the state, laws encouraging the consolidation

of small districts into town-wide systems, and pressure for communities to mute or abandon distinct religious doctrines in public schooling. But by the mid-twentieth century, states were providing substantial aid to local school budgets, and in return they were in many states regulating curriculum content, teacher certification, and the length of the school year.

One benefit of this shared funding and shared governance was that the states could make modest attempts to ameliorate the harsh inequalities of district-level school finance. Somewhat uncomfortable partners, united by regional preferences and a shared apprehension of federal control, opponents of federal control drew from both the local control and the states' rights traditions and tried, successfully if incongruously, to weld them together.

The first argument against a federal role — that it was unconstitutional — had waned (but not disappeared) by the 1950's. The second argument — that decisions about local schooling were best left to local decision-makers — was central. Although it was often challenged by civil rights advocates from the 1950's on, it has many supporters to this day. The third argument was that federal intervention was not needed because localities, with help from their states, could provide good education for their children. Thus, Robert Taft, opposing "emergency" assistance for schools in 1943, argued that states did not lack the resources to do the job, and for Taft such a lack of state capacity would have been the only justification for federal aid. Two things are noteworthy about this argument. First, it represents an early version of the equal opportunity argument, but the unit of analysis is the state, not localities or individuals. Second, this criterion allowed the possibility that in the future such an incapacity *would* be demonstrated. And that is exactly what happened. In 1946 Taft changed his mind, having again studied the state data on school finance. He

joined with Democrats in the Senate to propose a bill guaranteeing a minimum per pupil expenditure across the country.¹⁷ But many of his colleagues thought he had lost his much-vaunted Republican mind and abandoned the principles of fiscal restraint and limited federal intervention. Indeed those principles were the core of the opposition. They were well expressed by Sylvia Anderson, a citizen of Leurstown, Montana who wrote to the Secretary of Health Education and Welfare, Marion Folsom, in 1956. Like a lot of Republicans, she was dismayed at the endorsement of federal aid by President Eisenhower's White House Conference on Education. With clarity and force she expressed the arguments that have held so much sway on this issue over the decades and are thus worth noting in detail:

My husband and I are against any Federal aid to education because: 1.) Federal aid means federal control, 2.) No one will be able to stop the snowballing effect once it got started... 3.) Uncle Sam is \$280 Billion in debt — I'm ashamed to tell my kids that — they will have that mess to clean up. 4.) A certain amount of money will be lost in the shuffle from State to Federal and back to State. 5.) Federal aid means more people on federal payroll, therefore more centralization of government which we are absolutely against. 6.) Our state can take care of itself. 7) Catholics will want Federal aid too which will lead to a State-Church government, which we are against. 8.) We feel there is a conspiracy to undermine and bankrupt the U.S.A... This was evident at the White House Conference on Education... 9.) Pressure put upon you by professional educators may be sincere, but we feel too many of them are not practical minded — they're idealists. 10.) If you raise taxes any more you'll defeat our economy — we already feel the pinch of years of pork-barrel socialism.¹⁸

The national Chamber of Commerce and its local affiliates echoed Mrs. Anderson's sentiments. The Detroit Board of Commerce wrote Folsom, "We believe that citizens of a community are best able to determine what type of educational program they wish to support" and that "citizens will recognize the folly of asking for financial assistance from a government that is operating at a deficit."¹⁹

This positive affirmation of the capacity of localities and states to provide education, and the positive wisdom of leaving decisions closer to the communities, had their negative corollary in distrust and apprehension of big, centralized government. These negative associations flowed from two related sources: anti-New Deal sentiment, and the conviction that big government was a step toward totalitarianism. Those who rejected the New Deal argued that it was a wrong-headed departure from Jeffersonian principles of limited government. These views became reinforced and linked with two international contexts, in swift succession: the fight against fascist nations in World War II and the struggles with Communism in the Cold War. In the 1950's, arguments against federal aid as a big-government menace ranged from the long-standing, calmly stated positions of the national Chamber of Commerce, to the more extreme views of the radical right. In his regular radio broadcast on Mutual Broadcasting System, John T. Flynn editorialized,

There has been a powerful element in this country promoted mainly by the socialist elements. It is part of the general scheme to take power away from the states and give it to Washington... The scheme has been promoted for a number of years by the National Education Association... [It] is a movement to enable the federal government to take over the job of turning out a whole generation of little socialists and pinkoes of various hues.²⁰

Thus the anti-centralization argument had a particular anti-Communist twist in the 1950's. When Alabama Congressman Carl Elliott, an ardent New Dealer, talked about the obstacles to federal education aid in the 1950's, he named the "3 R's," which included Race, Religion, and "Reds." This mantra of three "R's" has lived on, repeated again and again by historians: federal aid bills failed because of a combination of religion (aid to parochial schools), race (the threat that federal aid would be coupled with demands for racial desegregation), and traditional anti-centralization arguments, including the anti-Communist version.²¹

However, if we look at the work of scholars who have closely dissected the failure of federal aid to education legislation from the 1940's through the early 1960's, we find that there were more than three obstacles. In a famous article, Hugh Price used the phrase "3 R's" but instead of "Reds," he substituted the Rules Committee of the House of Representatives, referring to the stranglehold that the Rules Committee and its chairman could employ to block legislation.²² To this nondemocratic aspect of House procedures could be added the powers of committee chairmen more generally, as in the example of Congressman Graham Barden, Democrat of North Carolina and chair of the House Committee on Education and Labor, who exercised every wile and every procedural power he had to delay or defeat federal aid to education bills he did not favor.²³ In their useful monograph Frank Munger and Richard Fenno discussed a few important additions to the list of obstacles. Before they got to the "3 R's," they pointed out that people disagreed strongly about whether federal aid should be largely across the board or strongly equalizing in its allocation formulas. A certain level of reallocation can be a positive factor in gaining support (fairness, share the wealth), but strongly reallocative legislation is

a tough sell, because opponents always do a chart of the winners and losers (which, in this case, are states). Second, lest we forget, Munger and Fenno noted that people disagreed strongly about what the purposes of federal aid should be (the leading candidates in the 1940's and 50's were per pupil expenditures, school construction, and teacher salaries). After reminding us of these additional obstacles, Munger and Fenno turn to a chapter about the usual triumvirate: federal control (the centralization issue), parochial schools, and racial segregation.²⁴

In one of the best monographs on educational legislation in the 1950's and 60's James Sundquist lists the three traditional factors as key, but substitutes fiscal restraint for the centralization issue. Fiscal restraint is related to the anti-centralization theme but flows more from concern with balanced budgets than from devotion to local control.²⁵ One further obstacle, so obvious that analysts don't list it, is party politics. Bipartisan cooperation was sometimes achieved on federal aid to legislation, but it was transitory, and, at some crucial points (as in President Eisenhower's last year) election-year politics scuttled cooperation on federal aid bills. A further obstacle is mentioned by Gordon Ambach, who worked in the Office of Education on higher education issues during the early 1960's. After 1958, when higher education began to get significant help in the form of scholarships, construction and other assistance, there arose competition between the higher education community and those still pressing for substantial aid to elementary and secondary schools.²⁶ Finally, lack of Presidential leadership has been charged against President Truman, President Eisenhower and President Kennedy for the failure of education aid legislation during their administrations.²⁷ The obstacles to passage of federal aid to elementary and secondary education are there-

fore insufficiently summarized by the "three R's." A more comprehensive list might be called the Ten Gremlins:

- Anti-centralization
- The politics of equalization
- Fiscal restraint
- Lack of consensus on purposes
- Parochial school aid
- Party politics
- Segregation
- Competition with higher education
- The power of committee chairs
- Presidential inattentiveness

It is no wonder that one of the liveliest books on this topic is called *Obstacle Course on Capitol Hill*.²⁸ Prior to discovering that book, I had settled on a similar metaphor. I imagined two slalom ski runs, next to each other, both with icy surfaces and hairpin turns. One is the House Slope, the other the Senate Slope. In order to secure passage of a bill for federal aid to schools, two teams, one on each slope, must ski down to the bottom of the hill. The upper reaches are called the Subcommittee Run, after which comes a series of turns known as the Committee Run. On the House Slope there is also a treacherous area known as the Rules Run. Then both slopes have bumpy, lower reaches called the Floor. If skiers from both teams make it that far, the two slopes merge in a final dizzying downhill straightaway through Conference Pass. Then the paths separate briefly again, for the Second Floor Run. At every turn, all the way down, opposing teams are allowed on the ski slope to set traps, trip the skiers, or throw gravel on the ice. At the very bottom, where the trails meet again, an official called the President has the opportunity to close the ski run with a key called the Veto.

STUDYING LEGISLATION: A REVIEW OF SOME MODELS

Given this impressive list of obstacles to federal aid, proponents continually failed, and their failures continually inspired them to innovate. The obstacles played out differently depending upon how the federal aid was defined and explained, so advocates kept pursuing the elusive bill that could make it all the way down the slalom. In doing so, they fashioned categories and theories about the purposes and politics of legislation, and some of those have persisted as analytical categories today. They can be helpful or mischievous, depending upon how they are used. Four sets of terms are discussed in the remainder of this paper. Specifically, they are: first, the familiar dichotomy between “general” and “categorical” aid to schools; second, my distinction between “episodic” and “incremental” factors in the development of the federal role, which resonates with Nelson Polsby’s distinction between “acute” policy innovation and “incubated” policy innovation; third, Theodore Lowi’s venerable distinction between “developmental,” “regulatory,” “redistributive,” and “constitutive” legislation; and fourth, a set of terms devised for this paper, distinguishing between the “original,” the “discretionary,” and the “mandatory” purposes of a federal role in elementary and secondary education. In every case, as we shall see, the terms are not as precise or as mutually exclusive as they superficially appear. Their usefulness depends upon recognizing that in the real world of legislation there will be hybrid proposals and gray areas, and thus there will be participants who have different perceptions of the same proposal.

“General” versus “Categorical” Aid

The big debates about school aid in the period from the 1940’s to 1957 were about proposals for

“general” aid, that is, legislation to aid school districts that did not tightly specify how the funds are to be used. The closest thing to purely general aid was the bill sponsored unsuccessfully by Senators Taft, Thomas and Hill in 1947, which proposed to supplement local school funds to create a minimum per-pupil expenditure of \$55 per child nationwide. Part of the impact aid funds also went for general operating expenses of school districts. But the word “general” is something of a misnomer because the label is also used for aid limited to school construction and aid limited to teachers’ salaries. Nonetheless, the term is used to cover proposals for all these purposes. It is a convenient way to summarize the early post-War history of federal aid: bills recommended before 1958 were general, and they all failed, while those in 1958 and 1965, which succeeded, were “categorical,” that is, they specified more carefully what the money was to be spent for. This tale, of course, masks many differences in the political attractiveness and fate of different kinds of “general” aid. The Eisenhower administration approved of construction aid but not teachers’ salaries, arguing that the risk of federal control was much greater in the latter case. The Catholic Church’s policy arm (the National Catholic Welfare Conference) was willing to consider construction aid to public schools if it was mixed with some concessions to private religious schools on transportation or other services, but it opposed aid to teachers’ salaries. Another complexity arises from the fact that most debates about general aid also involved the question of whether the aid would be targeted at the poorer states, and what formulas would be attached to eligibility. Nonetheless, this era in the history of federal aid is often summarized as simply a period of unsuccessful attempts to pass “general” aid bills.

In contrast, the National Defense Education Act (NDEA) of 1958 specified that the funds

were to be used for summer institutes for teacher training in math, science and languages, for language and science laboratories, and other enumerated activities. While the prospects of general aid had been paralyzed by disputes over aid to religious private schools, the NDEA afforded some benefits to these schools and their teachers. James Sundquist writes that the NDEA “had shown that special-purpose aid, carefully designed, could be enacted at a time when general-purpose aid could not be.”²⁹ Also, of course, the bill benefited from its association with an urgent Cold War crisis, the Soviets’ launching of Sputnik. The Elementary and Secondary Education Act benefited from the same characteristics. The Johnson administration presented it as a response to a crisis of poverty and racial disharmony that could be alleviated by educational opportunity. The bill specified that the money was to be used for the education of children in poor districts who needed help on basic skills, although the definition of poverty was defined broadly in order to elicit widespread support for the bill. Other titles within the ESEA provided for library purchases, experimental projects, educational research and other targeted activities.³⁰ It sidestepped the religious issue with the same sort of compromises NDEA proponents had employed.³¹ Sundquist argues that “politics” dictated the shift to special-purpose (categorical) aid, resulting in “a complex structure of special purpose assistance,” a shift that no one would have recommended a decade earlier.³² The politics of enactment pushed it that way because of church-state issues. But one could argue that local school districts would actually have been less threatened by general aid to construction or teacher salaries, because such purposes were not so tightly prescriptive, while categorical legislation sets the agenda and then monitors the expenditures.³³

Thus, while the categorical nature of the 1958 and 1965 legislation allowed federal officials some bargaining room on the church-state issue,

that same categorical nature of the legislation, with its attendant regulations, soon aroused another fount of traditional opposition to federal aid: resistance to federal control. And the other “R”, race, loomed important in the implementation of ESEA. In the South, ESEA’s Title I provided the lever for the Office of Education to press for racial desegregation, relying upon the fulcrum of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, which forbade discrimination in any program receiving federal money. This could have been the case regardless of whether the aid was general or categorical, but the categorical nature of ESEA put the federal government in a posture of considerable active intervention overseeing the way its money was being spent, so the resistance to desegregation was reinforced by resistance to detailed federal management of education.

If the politics of enactment pushed legislation from the general toward the categorical, the politics of implementation tended to the reverse. Paul Peterson argued that the NDEA, which appeared to be tightly categorical, in fact had hands-off, weak oversight from the federal government, making it quite popular with school officials and providing it with a reliable constituency. Impact Aid, which had been quite “general” from the beginning, enjoyed the same loose oversight and the same popularity among local school officials and the Congress.³⁴ Whether we can therefore generalize that federal programs only succeed when they are loosely supervised is problematic. Some programs (for example, aid for the education of children with disabilities) have succeeded in Congress because of widespread public support, despite considerable levels of regulation. The point to take from Peterson’s discussion of NDEA, it seems, is that appearance and reality are two different things when assigning labels like “general” and “categorical.” More important, legislation may look like one thing when enacted and

migrate into something else when implemented over several years.

In some cases, not only the purposes but the eligibility for participation widens. For example, successive reauthorizations over the years widened the definition of federal “impact,” thus widening the number of districts eligible. The same process occurred with Title I of ESEA: as the formula defining “poor” families widened, the number of eligible schools continually increased. In both cases, the legislation became, in this sense, more “general.”

Critique:

The deceptively simple distinction between “general” and “categorical” aid is therefore quite complex. It can be analytically useful and interesting if we keep the following caveats in mind. First, the pair of terms is better seen as a continuum than as a set of mutually exclusive categories. Some “general” aid bills are more targeted than others (*e.g.*, aid for teachers’ salaries is more specific than aid for per pupil expenditures). Conversely, some categorical programs are broader than others (*e.g.*, ESEA was broader than NDEA, and NDEA was broader than vocational education). Second, “categorical” legislation can, over the years, become more “general” as eligibility widens or regulations allow more discretion to local authorities. The research literature on implementation used to say “all implementation is local,” meaning that top-down regulation didn’t work very well at all; in the 1980’s, a body of research suggested that implementation of federal programs was a long process of negotiation between federal, state, and local actors, sometimes leading to mutually acceptable, workable programs that retained a measure of categorical direction and oversight.³⁵ Third, and paradoxically, the more categorical programs there are, the more they collectively act like general aid for a district. The federal government did what it could

to ensure that federal funds would “supplement, not supplant” local and state expenditures. Yet even as early as the 1960’s, local school officials surveying federal programs — though they might fret over the bureaucratic burden of receiving the grants — could reap considerable benefit to their budgets from programs for vocational education, science, math, and language training and facilities, compensatory education, library purchases, reform projects, and other purposes. This point — that the more categorical programs there are, the more they act like a form of general aid — is a more speculative and metaphorical point, but it underscores the general caution that the distinction between “general” and “categorical” aid is fuzzy.

“Incremental” versus “Episodic” Factors Influencing the Federal Role

This distinction relates more to the politics of an expanding federal role than to its purposes. One explanation for why the federal government continually assumes more authority and engages in more activities points to periodic crises that overcome our otherwise reluctant attitude toward federal intervention. The solution to the crisis is a piece of legislation, or the creation of an agency, to address the problem. Perhaps the program helps solve the problem, often not, but by the time the crisis has receded, the program has developed a bureaucratic momentum, including employees, regulations, and constituents. Thus, the agency survives, and the federal government is at a new plateau of activity in that area. The escalation continues with the next crisis.³⁶

This “Leviathan” interpretation seems plausible when applied to the federal role in elementary and secondary education since World War II. After years of failure for general aid, the NDEA succeeded on the heels of the Sputnik Crisis. And the Civil Rights movement of the 60’s played a

role in the passage of ESEA. But to some extent, the association of landmark legislation with social crisis is required rhetoric. The proponents of general aid loudly proclaimed an “emergency” shortage of classrooms and teachers in the early 1950’s, to no avail. And the widely successful promotion of crisis mentality by the 1983 *Nation at Risk* report, did not lead to a growth of the federal Leviathan, even though the rhetoric of crisis was supported by malaise from the 1980’s recession and was accompanied by reports of America’s declining productivity and declining test scores. However, because the Reagan administration was firmly committed to a reduction in the federal role, the legislative aspect of this crisis played itself out mostly at the state level. So there are educational “crises” without landmark federal legislation.

The converse can also be true. Public Law 94-142, for the education of children with disabilities, which was passed in 1975, followed a gradual and profound professional shift of approach, not a sudden crisis. Such developments may be called “incremental.” In the history of the federal role in education they include such factors as the public’s gradual habituation to the federal role in other areas like housing and transportation, evolving constitutional concepts relevant to education, expanding consciousness about rights, and trends in immigration. These and other developments create the context and conditions that lead to policy innovations.

My distinction between “episodic” and “incremental” factors echoes Nelson Polsby’s distinction between “acute” and “incubated” policy innovations. Studying eight cases, including both foreign and domestic policy initiatives, Polsby posited two types of policy initiatives. “Acute” initiatives develop quickly, in reaction to a pressing crisis, with few alternatives developed, and constraints on partisanship and debate. “Incubated” initiatives develop over a long period

of time, with robust consideration of alternatives and strenuous, partisan debate.³⁷

Critique:

In Polsby’s scheme, legislation is either “acute” or “incubated.” In reality, of course, there are hybrid cases, or, more important, cases in which some observers see the innovation as a sudden outcome of a crisis and other observers argue that it resulted from a more long-term deliberative process. In an exchange with Daniel Patrick Moynihan, Elliott Richardson (then an Assistant Secretary of Health, Education and Welfare), cautioned against the belief that NDEA emerged suddenly, as a result of the Sputnik scare.³⁸ Indeed, I had already tracked Richardson through the archival paper trail, from the White House Conference on Education in 1955, to the Committee on Education After High School in 1956, to the HEW task force on higher education legislation in 1957, which produced a bill that was nearly identical to NDEA during the year preceding the launch of Sputnik. That bill became NDEA. Similarly, with regard to ESEA, there appears at first glance a great disjunction between Kennedy’s failed attempts at legislation for elementary and secondary education, and Johnson’s swift, dramatic victory in 1965; yet, various elements of that victory had been “incubating” in the Kennedy years, most notably, the idea of an omnibus bill and the idea of tying the education legislation to the economic and social health of the nation.

Therefore, as in the case of “general” and “categorical” aid, we cannot treat the “episodic” and the “incremental” as mutually exclusive, but rather they combine, in different measure, in different legislative situations. That perception seems supported by the recent literature on political agenda-setting: first, the argument that successful legislation often comes about from the combination of an available, relevant set of policy

ideas (the policy “stream”) and the opening of a policy “window” that provides the opportune moment; and second, the idea that stability and instability in policy-making is related to the creation and decay of policy “monopolies.”³⁹ This literature can contribute to a more rounded picture of how the federal role has developed.

Still, the Leviathan thesis reminds us of two important points: first, that the politics surrounding new federal programs often encourages the assertion of a crisis to justify a new intervention; and, second, that once implemented, legislative programs often create a bureaucracy and a constituency that guarantees their continuation. The Leviathan thesis runs the risk, however, of overlooking the incremental processes that also encourage new federal initiatives, and second, overestimates the inexorable, linear upward climb. The thrust of Johnson’s liberalism unraveled by the late 1970’s; the share of local education budgets provided by the federal government went back down from 9 percent to 6 percent; and the late 1980’s consensus on national standards got politicized in the Clinton administration, over issues like whether standards would be developed to measure students’ “opportunity to learn.” While the trajectory of federal involvement in education was generally upward from 1958 to 1978, it was always bumpy, contested terrain. And from the late 1970’s to the present, each administration has had to reinvent the federal role in education.

Theodore Lowi’s Enduring Legislative Taxonomy

Proceeding from his skepticism about the “imperial Presidency” literature in the era of Lyndon Johnson and Richard Nixon, Theodore Lowi tracked legislative proposals from their planning stages, through committees and in the press, to the floor debates. He distinguished

between four types of legislation. “Distributive” legislation targets money at specific clients or purposes (it is called “developmental” by some political scientists). Such statutes include subsidies, land policies, aid to airports, river and harbors, and in education, vocational education or the GI Bill. Such initiatives generally flow out of the executive branch or from committees; they are perceived as creating only winners, not losers; thus, they are often uncontroversial and sometimes have low visibility. “Redistributive” legislation reallocates resources from some groups to others in a more obvious fashion, as in Social Security, farm aid, progressive income taxes, or Title I of the ESEA. These initiatives tend to breed strong coverage in the press and consequently a lot of activity on the floor of the Congress. “Regulatory” legislation implies the rule of law but nonetheless similarly generates much floor activity. Decision-making is dominated by Congress, not the Executive branch. Examples would be labor relations legislation, or the regulation of advertising or drugs; at the local level, it could be rent control. Regulatory legislation affecting education includes Title IX of the 1972 Education Amendments, prohibiting sex discrimination in federally funded education programs, or Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964. “Constitutive” legislation, not important for our purposes here, deals with such issues as the reapportionment of districts or the creation of new agencies. Lowi found that these categories behave differently with regard to who does the development of the legislation, who does the debating, and how much public and press scrutiny they receive.⁴⁰

Does Lowi’s taxonomy provide a key to understanding the federal role in education? There are two aspects of Lowi’s enterprise that need not detain us here, one empirical, the other theoretical. First, Lowi concluded that the “imperial” presidency had been overrated, and that

Congress was the key player in legislation more than people thought. Second, he attempted to develop a predictive theory based on the four types. But for our purposes the importance of the categories lies in the fact that they became enshrined in the literature on federalism, and some analysts have used them to make normative judgments about what types of legislation can be best handled by each level of government — federal, state or local.⁴¹ Paul Peterson recommended in 1995 that the federal government focus on its primary strength and responsibility, which lay in redistributive policies for social security, welfare, health care and the like. At the same time he recommended that the federal government should take a more cautious stance toward developmental legislation, especially the kind that leads to pork-barrel allocation of funds by enterprising Congressional representatives.⁴² Alice Rivlin had made a similar recommendation in 1992, essentially that the federal, state and local roles should be clarified, that overlap should be reduced, and that the federal government should stick mainly to redistributive actions.⁴³

Critique:

As with the previous taxonomies, Lowi's categories are not mutually exclusive. One person may see Title I as a form of general aid, another as fundamental redistributive policy. As Beryl Radin says, "In many cases, policies emerge from the political process containing a combination of these policy types. Coalitions are devised to maximize political support, not to enhance policy design coherence."⁴⁴ Like the other analytical categories, Lowi's are more useful if they are seen as *aspects* of legislation, not clear-cut *types*.

Even if the distinction between redistributive and distributive legislation was always clear-cut, we would still be in a quandary. The advice that the federal government is especially well-suited to the redistributive role seems less contro-

versial than the recommendation that it should divest itself of the distributive programs. Nobody likes pork-barrel giveaways (except those who benefit), but that hardly exhausts the repertoire of federal grants-in-aid. What should the federal government do when it sees a national interest in helping states and localities do something they are not currently doing and perhaps are unable to do? Peterson recognized this problem when he worried at the end of his book about the fate of cities and their poorer residents.⁴⁵ The advice of Peterson and Rivlin leaves us with few tools to decide carefully which developmental initiatives the federal level should take. It is a huge area that in education would include most curriculum development (including virtually all of the NSF's work on elementary and secondary education), assessment, teacher training, libraries, guidance, vocational education, and a large host of other issues. This dilemma leads me in the next section to take one further excursion into the making of taxonomies.

The "Original," the "Discretionary," and the "Mandatory" Purposes of the Federal Government in Elementary and Secondary Education

By the "original" purposes of the federal role, I mean those modest functions originally assigned to the Office of Education and frequently cited as the uncontroversial, basic federal functions in education. The Department of Education Act (1867) assigned to the new agency the responsibility for collecting statistics and information about the condition of education in the country and disseminating such information, including observations about school organization and teaching methods. While there was some controversy about the functions and the performance of the new Department (soon Bureau) in its early years, the first two commissioners devel-

oped a set of activities that became the accepted function of the Bureau in the late nineteenth century. Henry Barnard and his successor, John Eaton, who served from 1870 to 1886, gathered statistics, hired professional writers to write reports, developed a fledgling national library of books on education, and published compendia of statistics, minutes of national meetings about education, and surveys of knowledge on various educational topics.⁴⁶ With no power to enforce compliance in any matter, the Bureau of Education sought to compile and disseminate information, report to Congress on the condition of the nation's schools, and write reports on promising developments in education. In the twentieth century, these functions withstood assaults on the federal role in education. Donald Senese, who was Assistant Secretary for the newly created Office of Educational Research and Improvement during the Reagan administration, emphasized that many Republicans, including the President, drew upon the Heritage Foundation's publication, *Mandate for Change*, and that it recognized educational research and statistics as a legitimate function of the federal government.⁴⁷

To these original functions were added a wide variety of functions I would call "discretionary," that is, Presidents and members of Congress found them consistent with the national interest in education, and sufficiently attractive, and they approved them through legislation. Once a new initiative was passed, however, various obligations ensued: the federal government was obligated to provide the money promised; states and local school districts who voluntarily participated were required to meet certain requirements, often including the provision of matching funds. Such programs fall under the term "grants in aid." They also generally fall under the "distributive" or "developmental" category of Lowi's scheme. Most federal programs in

education have not been strongly reallocative nor have they been required by some constitutional mandate. As with many of Lowi's "distributive" laws, winners and losers are not perceived, the sources of the money are diffuse, and the recipients of the aid are numerous and widely dispersed geographically. Such was the case with the first federal law for categorical aid to elementary and secondary schools, the Smith-Hughes Act of 1917, providing funds for vocational education, through voluntary grants administered by the states.⁴⁸ As noted above, federal grants-in-aid mushroomed after World War II, as the government got active in development projects in many sectors, including health, transportation, housing, and education. Discretionary legislation in education at the federal level has escalated as the national interest in education has expanded into campaigns for more equal opportunities and for higher general standards of excellence. Over the past five decades the federal government has offered grants for school libraries, for science and language labs, for school-based experiments in teaching and learning, for metric education, for the development of content standards and assessments, and for many other purposes.

As voluntary and consensual as these programs may seem, citizens, educators, and politicians differ wildly in their judgments about how involved the federal government should be in elementary and secondary education. Political positions on such discretionary legislation range from those who wish to curtail virtually all of it, abolishing the Department of Education and putting as much federal aid as possible into block grants to the states; to theorists who urge much more caution in selecting among developmental grant programs, leaving most of it to the states; to a variety of middle-of-the-road groups, including many interest groups who advocate ever greater federal aid in their target programs; to the advocates of national standards and national assessment, who

would like to see an authoritative (if shared) role for the federal government in comprehensive content standards and accountability systems. The differences of opinion here are not, for the most part, about *what* is being proposed — many agree that *someone* should regulate curriculum and develop test programs. Disagreement is over the *level* from which such authority is exercised. Opponents of federal prerogatives prefer to see authority in the hands of the states, or mostly at the district or school level, or even in the hands of individual teachers. In this era of standards-based reform, the federal government's involvement has ranged across curriculum development, assessment policy, whole-school reform methods, advocacy of a voluntary national test, the relationship of Title I assessments to state standards, and a host of other thorny problems. Because the policy frameworks of standards-based reform and school-based reform (including its free-market choice version) are so profoundly at odds, debates about the federal government's proper role in developmental legislation have become intense.

Redistributive (or reallocative) legislation, an important category in the Lowi scheme, is not required of the government. The U. S. Constitution does not specify how progressive the tax structure must be, and the *Rodriguez* case declared that the Fourteenth Amendment does not require equalization of school district financial resources.⁴⁹ Thus, at the federal level, redistributive policy is another important and often controversial purpose within the discretionary category.

Hot controversy of a different sort has long been generated by my third category, issues that are “mandatory.” Carried largely by the courts and involving only a small portion of legislative actions taken by the Congress, these interventions are nonetheless the most coercive and controversial elements of the federal role in education. These issues include civil rights matters like protection from racial discrimination, First Amendment matters concerning the separation of church and state and the free exercise of religion, and other constitutional issues, including students' rights and the educational rights of language minorities. Because these issues and the rulings about them arise from the U. S. Constitution, they are inherently federal and, in a

Since World War II the federal government had introduced a wide variety of such programs, yet there seems little consensus and no firm principles about which are “proper” functions of the federal level. Choices seem to depend upon the inventiveness and the persuasiveness of the proponents, the economic resources available to the federal government, and the level of partisanship on the issue in the Congress and the electorate.

sense, mandatory. Of course, the enforcement of constitutional decisions in education varies tremendously from one period to the next; but the government is not at liberty simply to ignore an issue once raised properly and forcefully through the courts. The executive and legislative branches may delay prodigiously, as in the well-known history of the *Brown* decision, and the lax enforcement of the *Bible* and *Prayer* decisions of the early 1960's.⁵⁰ But the nonjudicial branches of the government have to face these issues, to

resolve their positions, and, ultimately, either enforce or challenge the decisions. Just as the issues are pressed in a mandatory way on the government, when the enforcement mechanisms finally get in motion, the solutions are applied coercively on the country's schools and families. Unlike grant-in-aid programs, constitutionally-related educational issues are not optional. Some Supreme Court decisions, to be sure, are permissive, as when they declare that a certain practice is *not* unconstitutional, and is thus available to states or localities who wish to adopt it. Such is the case with decisions like *Everson* (1947) that allowed states to provide busing of children to religious private schools, but did not coerce any state to do so. But when practice is declared unconstitutional, the federal government disallows it as a matter of law. The enforcement may be very uneven or dilatory, but compliance is not voluntary.

Critique:

As with the Lowi scheme, we may now ask whether these three categories I have proposed — about the original, the discretionary, and the mandatory educational purposes of the federal government — are useful in laying out the evolving traditions and the options for the future. The original purposes of the federal government in education — statistics, research, and information — are now seen as both acceptable and minimal. There may be specific debates about how the statistics agency handles the interpretation of data, or why the research agency doesn't seem more useful, but not much debate about whether gathering statistics, sponsoring research, and publicizing best practice are appropriate federal activities in elementary and secondary education. The biggest challenges are in the two other categories. The challenge with the discretionary category is the proliferation of programs. Since World War II the federal government had introduced a wide variety of such programs, yet

there seems little consensus and no firm principles about which are “proper” functions of the federal level. Choices seem to depend upon the inventiveness and the persuasiveness of the proponents, the economic resources available to the federal government, and the level of partisanship on the issue in the Congress and the electorate. The challenge of the civil rights, church-state, and other constitutionally-based mandates, is that they are *not* discretionary. The administration cannot do without a position on racial segregation, or affirmative action, or aid to religious schools. The question is what solutions to espouse and how hard to press them.

Like the other taxonomies, these categories are not mutually exclusive. The “original” modest purposes, including statistics and research, have mushroomed into activities that affect the discretionary and mandatory purposes, as in recent debates about the uses of the National Assessment of Educational Progress, the prospect of a Voluntary National Test, or the statistical demands of Title I. And the promotion of good educational practices, which has been in the federal repertoire since Henry Barnard's time, may sound innocuous, but it can involve competition among policy alternatives, as in the recent Obey-Porter bill, which anointed a set of school reform strategies. There are also important overlaps between the mandatory and discretionary categories. At a simple level, discretionary funding is sometimes attached to mandatory purposes, as in the Emergency School Aid Act (1972), which provided transportation funds to districts attempting to desegregate schools through busing. At a grander scale, the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 was a merger of civil rights concerns and a reallocation of resources across districts, all surrounded and assisted by various developmental provisions for school improvement, libraries, research, and improved state departments of education. It was an artful blend of categories.

The principal provision of the ESEA, Title I, for the basic skills training of children in poorer school districts, is an important example of a federal purpose that bridges my categories of “mandatory” and “discretionary.” Although the Supreme Court declared (in *Rodriguez*, 1973) that the equalization of expenditures across school district lines was not constitutionally required, there are nonetheless two senses in which compensatory education for children in poor districts (and, indeed, the equalization of educational opportunity more broadly) is virtually mandatory. First, since the 1960’s the right to equal educational opportunity has come to be an article of faith among many Americans, whether it is a right protected by the Fourteenth Amendment or not. The rhetoric is belied by the staunch resistance of Americans to the equalization of per pupils costs, but the rhetoric seems to keep alive programs aimed at softening the harshness of the inequality, and the many cases of the past two decades in which *state* courts have ruled that their constitutions demand equalization of school resources have reinforced the public’s awareness of this inequity. Second, as standards-based reform moves toward student accountability, attaching high stakes to student performance (such as retention in grade, assignment to tracks, or failure to graduate), equal protection issues will be raised on behalf of students who have not had a sufficient opportunity to learn the material tested. There is, then, an intermediate category of virtually mandatory federal education programs, including those aimed at increasing equal opportunity. One can imagine a lot of things happening to Title I, but it is hard to imagine Congress abolishing all federal efforts at providing more equal opportunity.

Until now I have focused mainly on legisla-

tion for financial assistance to schools. The discussion of mandatory, constitutionally-based issues has expanded our horizon to include judicial influence, which often operates independent of grant funds. I shall broaden our canvas further before we conclude, by mentioning two nonjudicial modes of federal influence, neither of which creates federal programs *per se*. First, block grants have become a familiar feature in educational discussions and legislation, especially since the Education Consolidation and Improvement Act of 1981. They serve as a revival of the “general aid” proposals in the 1950’s. In a block grant, the government allocates funds with no strings (or few strings) attached. Here the government is assisting education by being a good producer of

Since 1980 each administration has had to reinvent the federal role. Even in the creation of goals-based reform, and the successive reauthorizations of major programs like Title I, there has been an aura of instability and contestation quite different from the heady days of 1965.

revenue and by leaving the decisions about educational purposes to the local or state level. Second, the “bully pulpit” function of the federal government was much talked about during the first Reagan administration, when Secretary Bell’s pulpit was the *Nation at Risk* report (1983), which strongly influenced reform at the state level. Again, during the second Reagan administration, William Bennett relished the role and used the phrase. Perhaps no federal official has ever been so visible and vociferous while trying at the same time to reduce the authority and budget

of his own agency. The bully pulpit role was revived in the Clinton administration after the 1994 elections, which installed many conservative Republicans in Congress, complicating the Goals 2000 legislative program and deflecting much of it to the state level. Secretary Richard Riley, well-suited to the persuasive role, took his skills to

Postwar educational policy has continually faced the challenge of providing both equity and excellence. Each administration had to decide how much emphasis to put on each, and how these goals can be combined. Neither can be jettisoned.

such venues as a meeting between conservative Christians and public school educators, trying to find common ground on religion in the curriculum.⁵¹

The Impermanence of the Federal Role

We have examined several sets of terms used to characterize the purposes of federal education legislation. In the 1940's and 50's there was yet one more pair of terms that frequently entered the debates. Would federal aid to education be temporary or permanent? Many participants in the debates — Republicans, Roman Catholics, others nervous about new schemes for federal involvement — argued that if there was to be federal aid, it should only be temporary, aimed at a present crisis, with a definite sunset in view. This rhetorical weight against permanent federal aid for operating costs, construction, or teachers salaries was effective. But then legislative innovators turned to omnibus categorical bills — the NDEA, the failed

Kennedy omnibus bill of 1963, and the ESEA of 1965. The permanence issue became more ambiguous. Although these bills were justified as responses to crises, it was less clear that they would be phased out. In his exchange with Elliott Richardson after the passage of NDEA, Daniel Patrick Moynihan wrote that it had ended the debate over a federal role in education. Richardson, the lead author of NDEA, qualified this, saying that NDEA had indeed been “a crushing — even mortal — defeat for the all-out opponents of Federal action,” but that it was a middling approach, from “those who endorse short-term programs to meet specific needs.” A third participant in the debate, said Richardson, had outlined the third alternative. Representative Stewart Udall favored permanent federal aid, and that issue, said Richardson, was still undecided.⁵² The passage of ESEA in 1965 was seen as even more decisive. Writing three years after the event, political scientist James Sundquist said that ESEA “took the issue of federal ‘control’ out of the realm of ideological debate and thrust it into the area of practical administration. Some measure of federal leadership, influence, and control is now with us. Federal money is now being used, and will continue to be used, as a lever to alter... the American educational scene.”⁵³ It seemed to some that incremental and episodic factors had combined in 1965 to escalate the federal role, and that it would be a permanent escalation. But the Leviathan interpretation has proven only partly true. While ESEA Title I has survived, NDEA slowly receded and its provisions were eventually absorbed into other legislation or terminated. And Goals 2000, President Clinton's distinctive attempt to redefine the federal role, was substantially curtailed within a year of its passage, due to the negative reactions of conservatives elected in the elections of 1994. After that reversal, Under Secretary Marshall Smith wrote that the age of big federal programs was over; that

the future lay in the bully pulpit and in dramatic, temporary jolts of money or policy from the federal level.⁵⁴ There is, to be sure, a large legislative legacy from the period 1965 to 1979. The Department of Education has survived, and there are regular reauthorizations of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, with its centerpiece Title I. There are bills for the education of children with disabilities, for vocational education and training, and for other familiar federal initiatives. These have survived through two decades of debate about the federal role. Nonetheless, while some federal education programs have been protected by popular purposes and sturdy constituencies, others have ebbed and flowed. Even those constitutionally-related purposes that I have called mandatory are pursued vigorously or weakly, depending upon the political complexion of a given administration.

Since 1980 each administration has had to reinvent the federal role. Even in the creation of goals-based reform, and the successive reauthorizations of major programs like Title I, there has been an aura of instability and contestation quite different from the heady days of 1965. How would one achieve the consensus and momentum of 1965 again? Returning to the theme of this paper, let us look once again at purposes and politics.

TOWARD THE FUTURE: PURPOSES

Postwar educational policy has continually faced the challenge of providing both equity and excellence. Each administration had to decide how much emphasis to put on each, and how these goals can be combined. Neither can be jettisoned. ESEA emphasized the equity side of the polarity. It drew on expanding expectations of

what it was to be an American and what the federal government should do to provide opportunities. ESEA touched only incidentally on the excellence side — the quality of the core curriculum. Reviving such a focus on equity would require the federal government to address two widespread concerns that are stronger today than in 1965. First, many people believe that there has been too much emphasis on rights without a corresponding emphasis on responsibilities. Second, there is more concern about the general quality of the public education system for all of its students.

The next big synthesis that attracted considerable bipartisan support was standards-based reform. It tried to address both equity and excellence by aiming at high standards “for all stu-

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dents.” Yet its inspiration was in fact the opposite of ESEA; it was about the core academic program of the schools for all children, not focused on disadvantaged groups. And its equity concerns, when they emerged in the Clinton administration, caused cracks in the consensus.⁵⁵

Both ESEA and Goals 2000 embodied policy frameworks that reflected majority opinion about the problems and purposes of American K-12 schooling in their day. The legacies of both are

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written in the daily life of public schools. Each was a major synthesis, but each has evolved away from some of its early components. ESEA remains a huge program but became detached from its most controversial feature, its use in promoting school desegregation, and Title I funds are less concentrated on high poverty districts than was originally envisioned. Standards-based reform has also had a huge influence, but has had to forego two controversial features, the federal role in approving content standards and the proposal for national testing. It became primarily a state-level activity, with the encouragement of the federal government.

Is a new synthesis of federal purposes in education possible? A good, new synthesis would have to meet the twin demands of excellence and equity. That would take some imagination at this point in our history, because those competing purposes have the capacity to pit people against each other. A new synthesis would also have to address the thorny question of the duties of citizenship. Critics of the integrative, liberal state say that its policies have put too much emphasis on group rights, that identity politics spelled the doom of liberalism as defined in the Johnson era.⁵⁶ On the other hand, critics of the increasingly influential free-market, pluralist, laissez-faire position say that its key policy goal — vouchers for school choice — would privatize the purposes of education, emphasize individual

gain, and abandon common purposes and experiences.⁵⁷ Thirty-five years of debates over the purposes of education have put us in a very different position today than that of Lyndon Johnson and his generation as they set out to imagine a federal role for education and build consensus around it in 1965.

TOWARD THE FUTURE: POLITICS

Reinventing the federal role in education will involve daunting challenges for the new administration. First, having made the states the main players for two decades, and having increased their capacity to develop and implement educational policy, it is difficult to imagine federal officials putting those genies back in the bottle. Of course, state-based standards reforms do not exhaust the federal government's involvement in education. Many programs still move from Washington to classrooms in a mode that would seem familiar to policy makers from the 1960's. Congress and the administration formulate and legislate policy, federal officials confer with people in the field and then issue guidelines. Then they disburse funds, monitor and negotiate state and local compliance, and they adjust guidelines. States and districts, along with various other interest groups, take active roles. But the capacities of the state agencies of education are no longer the subject of derision by the federal level. They have been heavily shaped by federal funding and federally-funded personnel within state agencies, but they are also willing and necessary partners in education reform. A new synthesis of federal purposes in education, then, would have to acknowledge this change in the role and capacity of the states.

Second, the politics of education (and national politics in general) have been highly partisan recently. The fact that education is a much more prominent issue with the electorate today than in 1965 creates as much controversy as con-

sensus. If a new synthesis of federal purposes in education is to succeed politically in the new administration, it will have to do much work in the political center. The education reform scene is more fragmented than in 1965. There is a substantial interest in choice and privatization. Within the reform of public schools, there are differences between standards-based reformers and school-based reformers that will demand great skill to reconcile.

As a historian, I have no special wisdom to craft an program that would make it to the bottom of the treacherous ski slope, crossing the finish line with a new omnibus bill raised in triumph. Arm-chair theorists would like to see federal policy makers address the purposes and politics of their education program in a systematic way. Actual policy occurs in a more haphazard way, driven by many existing commitments and political factors. Nonetheless, a little dash of historical reflection, political theory, and broad policy analysis might help bring coherence to the day-to-day agenda. Among the persistent questions policymakers will face in reinventing the federal role in elementary and secondary education are these:

- How much equalization of resources shall we attempt, and through what means? What strategies, incentives, and human resources can be employed to increase the likelihood that additional material resources will translate into good educational outcomes?
- How many and what kind of discretionary, developmental programs shall we pursue, and how will we fashion a parsimonious

agenda from endless possibilities? How will the agenda-setting and the conduct of programs be creatively shared with states and localities?

- What balance shall we strike between an emphasis on equity and an emphasis on excellence? How can we best pursue simultaneously the improvement of the schools' performance as a whole, for all children, and their success with students who are disadvantaged?
- How shall we approach constitutionally-based education issues amidst thickets of philosophical, political, and technical problems? How can we broaden consensus among Americans about the principles of fairness and inclusiveness that lie behind such issues?
- How can we make the traditional purposes of federal involvement in education — conducting research, gathering statistics, and disseminating information about good practice — serve the rest of the agenda without politicizing those functions?

The times may not seem auspicious for a new consensus about the federal role in education, but one might reasonably have thought that in 1963 as well. In any case, whatever the odds, every new administration, along with the Congress, educators, and the electorate, must face the challenge of assessing worthy purposes and making politics work in the service of those purposes. In the present environment — as so often in the past — the choice is between creative, constructive synthesis or stalemate.

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The research that informs this essay is part of a larger project entitled *The Federal Role in Elementary and Secondary Education, 1950 - 2000*, funded by The Spencer Foundation, whose support the author enthusiastically acknowledges.

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