Rethinking the Federal Role in Elementary and Secondary Education

By Paul T. Hill

Are the values or principles embodied in the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 the same values or principles which should guide an extension and remolding of that Act during the new Congress and Administration?

Two core values established early in the life of the ESEA are still fundamentally important: First, federal funds should benefit children, not localities; and second, federal funds should be applied after inequities in local funding are remedied.

Unfortunately, current program implementation does not reflect these values. Title I funds are tied not to individual children but to state and local bureaucracies. Moreover, federal rules that required localities to equalize spending on all children before Title I funds were allocated have not been implemented seriously. The next two short sections elaborate these two points:

FAILURE TO TIE BENEFITS TO CHILDREN

As Title I and other federal programs have evolved since 1965, they fund specific services and support creation and maintenance of bureaucracies to provide those services. This deflects funds from services to administration and creates a class of state and local administrators whose careers are tied to maintenance of the status quo. Moreover, programs that mix federal funding with unfunded mandates (e.g. IDEA) thrust the federal government into local politics. Federal programs strengthen interest groups advocating particular forms of local spending (e.g. more on special education, thus inevitably less on schools’ core instructional programs). Thus, in their implementation, federal programs have strayed from the original ESEA principles, by funding bureaucracies and programs not children, and by strengthening interest groups not schools.

If it is serious about upholding the original principles of ESEA, the federal government should support the education of disadvantaged children directly, by funding the schools that actually educate those children, not government administrative structures. Congress should consolidate all federal grant programs into one funding mechanism, with procedures for identifying individual beneficiaries and providing funds directly to the schools those children attend. If it is serious about upholding the original principles of ESEA, the federal government should support the education of disadvantaged children directly, by funding the schools that actually educate those children, not government administrative structures. Congress should consolidate all federal grant programs into one funding mechanism, with procedures for identifying individual beneficiaries and providing funds directly to the schools those children attend.1

The first step toward redefining the federal role would be to consolidate all federal grant pro-
grams into one statute and create clear definitions of beneficiaries. A reform of this scope would require scrutiny of some programs that do not normally come up for reauthorization at the same time as ESEA, for example, Vocational Education, IDEA, and the Department of Education’s research structure. There is, however, no reason why those programs cannot be considered for reauthorization on the ESEA timetable. Including such programs in a review of ESEA is a necessary precondition for creating a rationalized and effective federal role in education.

Federal policy must work with, not against, the reality that the only people who can help a student are that child’s teachers, parents, and neighbors. Washington should avoid buttressing any particular administrative regime or creating permanent groups of federally paid state or local employees. Schools should be free to use federal money for teacher training, new instructional materials, or outside assistance that can improve teaching, but districts should not be free to use money for programs that put central office priorities before the needs of individual schools.

Schools and communities must struggle with the question of what is to be done for children who cannot learn in normal classroom environments. Powerful interest groups and legal advocacy organizations, many created by federal subsidies, will continue to have great influence. But the federal government should not prevent schools from experimenting with different ideas about how best to serve the disabled, or from considering the effectiveness of alternative services and the needs of other children.

Funding of students, not bureaucracies, will almost certainly strengthen demands for increased federal funding. If Title I funds were to follow children to schools, the 30-40% of disadvantaged children who do not now receive Title I services would finally get them. Congress might decide to keep aggregate funding steady and reduce the amount allocated for individual children, but that would be unlikely. Because federal money and its uses would be visible at the school level, the case for increased funding would be easy to make. A school could add another teacher for every 50 or 60 disadvantaged students, thus creating many new opportunities for instructional improvement.

**FAILURE TO MAINTAIN COMPARABILITY**

Despite ESEA’s commitment to provide federal funds only when local spending is equalized, local spending, especially within the big-city school districts that receive the bulk of Title I funds, is not equal. This has very negative consequences for the quality of teachers assigned to low-income schools.

Daily headlines bring new bad news about the low quality of teachers in low-income schools. At a time when teachers are in short supply just about everywhere, the poorest schools get the teachers with the least training and experience. It’s so bad, that New York City and Los Angeles are considering tactics used for recruiting professional athletes and dot-com stars, hiring...
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and minority schools consistently get far less qualified teachers than kids in wealthier neighborhoods in the same district. This is the direct consequence of a fundamental flaw in how school districts allocate teachers and funds to schools.

The problem is total freedom of choice for senior teachers. Senior teachers can choose where they work, and most understandably choose to work in the most attractive schools and neighborhoods where the demands on teachers are least severe.

At first blush, it's hard to argue with this. Rank, after all, has its privileges. But, given the importance of teacher quality, it's harder to defend procedures that systematically encourage the best teachers to head for classrooms with the fewest difficulties, leaving new and inexperienced teachers to deal with the learning needs of students with the most severe problems.

This is how it works: As teachers gain seniority they get the privilege of choosing the schools in which they work. In order to preserve this privilege, districts charge schools the same amount for each teacher no matter what her actual salary is. A school staffed entirely by highly-paid professionals pays no more for its teachers than a school staffed entirely by low-paid raw recruits.

Senior teachers overwhelmingly prefer schools in nicer neighborhoods, where family support is often strongest and fewer students pose severe challenges. These schools are free to assemble staffs made up entirely of highly-paid senior teachers.

When there is a shortage of qualified teachers, schools in poor neighborhoods must accept many inexperienced and marginally qualified teachers. Moreover, as teachers gain experience, they transfer to other schools. As a result, poverty-neighborhood schools are staffed by a shifting cast of new and poorly prepared teachers. Faculties change too rapidly to pursue any sort of sustained improvement strategy.

Small wonder that every year one-third of new teachers leave the profession. Facing the toughest school assignments, many green teachers quit because they cannot handle the pressure; others leave because they get no support and cannot stand the frustration. Those who stay learn to shut themselves off in their classrooms and ignore the rest of the school.

Some districts claim to allocate disproportionate amounts of money to poverty-neighborhood schools. However, as Marguerite Roza has shown in the case of Seattle, funding formulas that give extra weight to needy students are often a shell game. Senior teachers still cluster in the nicer neighborhoods. Poverty-area schools get extra money in the published budget but the district charges still them more for their teachers than those teachers are paid. The result is that schools in poor areas have fewer real dollars per student than the budget claims they have.
Title I gives the federal government authority to fix this. The authority lies in the principle of comparability, which says that federal funds may not be used to compensate for inequitable local funding of schools. To get federal funds, districts are supposed to show that per pupil spending from state and local sources is equal in all schools. Under this 35-year old federal statute, therefore, every district receiving Title I funds and spending less per pupil in low income neighborhoods is operating in violation of the law.

Unfortunately, since the principle of comparability was first written into the Title I statute it has been amended to let districts calculate comparability without considering teacher salaries. Body counts matter but not teacher pay or experience. Comparability, designed to ensure extra expenditures in poor schools, has been redefined (under pressure from school districts and unions) to ignore the resource that matters most.

The fact is that gross school funding inequities within districts could be eliminated practically overnight. The President could demand new guidelines measuring comparability in terms of real dollars. School districts could have a limited period — say five years — to show that poverty area schools had the same real-dollar per-pupil spending as other schools. The adjustment could be easy, given that half of all senior teachers will retire in the next five years. As teachers retired, inexperienced teachers could be placed in schools that employ disproportionate numbers of highly-paid teachers. This would make it harder for teachers to leave poverty-area schools as soon as they gain a little experience. All schools would then face the manageable challenge of combining the work of more and less experienced teachers.

2. What lessons should we learn from the experiences of the last 35 years of federal aid to guide the new President and Congress as they address these important issues in the upcoming year? In particular, based on your knowledge and experiences, what would you recommend for a re-fashioned federal role in education?

The federal government needs to pay special attention to the big cities. Despite programs like Title I, big-city children, most poor and from minority groups, are still half as likely to graduate from high school and to reach adulthood in command of basic skills, as other American children. This is a tragedy, and much more can be done. Our greatest cities are treasure houses filled with human talent and great institutions – museums and universities, orchestras, churches, and foundations, all of them dedicated to learning and to uplifting the human spirit. Unfortunately, the way we now run public education has kept these institutions on the sidelines. They can give money and moral support, but they cannot create or operate public schools — nor can their musicians, scientists, writers and artists teach students, except before and after school hours or as volunteers.

Federal leadership can help these cities find ways of making all their resources relevant to the education of city children. This will require many changes — more aggressive use of charter school laws to create new schooling options, more flexible uses of federal funds, fewer barriers to private investment in schools, and greater openness to allowing experts in their fields to teach in schools without abandoning their other careers.

These changes require local initiative, and cooperation with the states. But the habit of treating the public education system as a bureaucracy separate from the other resources of a city is hard to break. People who are dedicated to education of the public’s children must be prepared to take risks, accept experiments, track results, and abandon arrangements that do not work.
The federal government cannot mandate these things to happen. But the federal government can help city leaders forge new compacts to strengthen public education. An important role for a new President would be to call a series of small White House Conferences that will bring the government and private leaders of big cities together, one city at a time, to hammer out new arrangements for using all of a city’s assets for the education of its children. During the conferences the President and Secretary of Education should offer to reallocate federal funds and waive regulations that might get in the way of cities’ initiatives.

3. How can sufficient political support be garnered to ensure that your vision for a re-fashioned federal role in education is put in place by the new President and Congress, and supported in the years ahead?

I have called for three changes in the implementation, though not in the fundamental principles, of the federal role in education: First, provide extra funding for children, not localities, and fund all eligible children, not just some of them. Second, enforce the principle of comparability, so that real-dollar spending is equal for all children before federal funds are applied. Third, create a capacity for the White House and the Secretary of Education to craft agreements on reform strategy with the leaders of individual cities, and to tailor federal program rules so that they support local reform strategies.

All of these proposed changes would dispossess or inconvenience someone. The first change would eliminate specialized state and local bureaucracies attached to federal programs. The second change would eliminate incentives for experienced teachers to flee schools in poverty neighborhoods. The third change would eliminate city leaders’ excuse that regulations and lack of flexible funding make real reform impossible.

Can these changes be made? Of course they can, if the White House and Congress decide to make them. Though the infrastructure built up to administer existing federal programs is large and powerful, it is not significantly larger or more powerful than the county-based welfare apparatus that Congress disassembled a few years ago. Similarly, though the constituencies that support the existing programs are large, they are not very strong if they lose parental support. It is no secret that African-American parents, once united around Title I as the best hope for their children, now want choices that city public school systems do not give them. If minority parents believed that a re-defined federal role could benefit their children, groups like the Urban League could be powerful forces for change.

With strong White House leadership, the federal role in education could be put back on a firm foundation. The federal government’s perspective is national: the President and Secretary of Education are positioned to see emerging national needs that are less visible from within a state or region, and to broker collaborations among states, districts, and regional organizations.

Programs that commit all federal funds to set programs, and that consistently align federal officials with particular interest groups and government bureaucracies, fritter away the federal government’s inherent advantages. The federal government can make a continuing contribution to the quality of education for all American children, particularly the poor and disadvantaged, if it re-commits itself to the original values and principles of ESEA.

The foregoing statements come easily to a person who, like the present author, lives a continent away from Washington and spends much more time in the halls of schools than in Congress or the Department of Education. Most
districts and all schools could readily adapt to drastic revisions in federal program structure and administration. The real barriers to change are not in the schools but in Washington, in the form of Congressional committee structures that make certain programs the “property” of powerful sub-committees, providers’ lobbies, and other adult groups who gain from the ways the programs are now run. Necessary change will be politically difficult. But the needs of children and schools must not take a back seat to the self-protection interests of politicians.

ENDNOTES


2 Unpublished estimates of the added cost of a “portable entitlement” range from $4 to $20 billion annually. The size of the estimate appears to depend on the analyst’s view of the desirability of such a change in federal program strategy.